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Madera County Court House
1902

MADERA COUNTY'S HISTORIC COURTHOUSE

The material used in this story comes from a variety of sources; Ray Coppock, staff writer for Madera Daily Tribune, 1949, Barbara Brown, present staff writer for Madera Daily Tribune, various news articles from both the Fresno Bee and Madera Daily Tribune, writers not identified, plus conversations with old timers.

There has been such a demand for information on the "Old Court House" the Board of Directors thought now would be a good time to put the story in our first quarter Historian for 1969.

In 1901, Madera County officials moved proudly into the present courthouse. It was, they boasted, the latest and best in county courthouses.

But it didn't come easily.

In 1893, the Madera county board of commissioners--the predecessor to the present board of supervisors--held its first official meeting in the Masonic hall in Madera, then located on 126-130 West Yosemite,

this hall was later called "Athletic Hall". This hall was removed a few years ago.

But that arrangement was temporary. As the county government organized, the first superior court room was located in the upper story of Rosenthal's store, which stood on the site now occupied by the Madera Drug company. The county offices were set up in the old Dworack building,

which later was converted into a rollerskating rink and finally was razed to give way to the present lawn south of the present postoffice.

Although this divided arrangement continued for six years, there was much dissatisfaction. As early as 1894, the board of supervisors delegated Supervisor J. T. Ward of Berenda to confer with a certain E. McLaughlin regarding a proposed courthouse site.

Supervisor Ward's report was brief and final:

"Mr. McLaughlin refused to lend any assistance or reduce the price of block 21; he stated that he had no interest whatever in the location of the courthouse, does not care whether it is on the street or three miles out; that he would not sell a block south of Yosemite Avenue under any consideration."

Despite such setbacks, crowded county officials persisted.

Encouragement arrived July 17, 1897, when real estate dealers, W. C. Maze and George J. Wren offered to sell all of lot 10 of the Hughes addition, which comprised much of the present courthouse site, to the county. Their price, for patriotic motives, was one dollar. The board of supervisors promptly accepted their offer.

(This was the same George J. Wren who afterward became mayor of Modesto.)

Then began several years of litigation with the Madera Flume and Trading company and I. Teilman, who owned the rest of the present courthouse site. After condemnation proceedings were begun, the board finally settled with the Madera Flume and Trading company for \$2,500 and with Teilman for \$1,000.

Meanwhile, the supervisors, desperate for more room, moved the county offices and court rooms to the Russ House, a large, two-story frame building which stood almost alone in a treeless area where the county library is situated now.

They signed a two-year lease for the building February 8, 1899. The rent was \$185 a month, payable, according to the supervisors' records, strictly in advance.

Two days later, the records show that J. W. Ragsdale and N. Rosenthal turned up with a rival plan and asked that the county rescind its lease with W. C. Maze for the Russ House. The clerk of the board carefully noted that the ensuing legal arguments were conducted by Attorney Francis A. Fee for Ragsdale and Rosenthal, N. C. Caldwell for Maze and District Attorney R. R. ~~Fawlen~~ ^{Fowler} for the county. The Russ House site was finally chosen.

Meanwhile, both citizens and county officials enthusiastically promoted the plan for a genuine county courthouse. On September 6, 1899, the supervisors' records show that a petition was filed with them, signed by many Madera citizens, asking that a courthouse be built.

In February of 1900, the necessary land was under control of the county and plans had progressed to such an extent that the supervisors advertised for architects to submit proposed plans of the courthouse. "The building," the supervisors directed, "shall be granite, absolutely fireproof and cost not to exceed the sum of \$60,000."

Granite construction was undoubtedly taken for granted by all concerned, not only because of its durability and stylishness at that time, but because some of the finest building granite in the world was being quarried in the Raymond-Knowles area.

A month later, after several days discussion of five plans submitted by various architects, the supervisors voted 4-1 to accept those of Hugh Braunton, whose background is now obscure, but who is believed to have been from Fresno.

Thereafter the process of building Madera county's new governmental center progressed rapidly. The \$59,963 bid of the Pacific Construction company was accepted and work began. It is noted that an "additional cost" of \$6,830 was eventually paid for granite facings--the product of the quarries which were the county's pride.

Total cost was \$100,000, this included furnishings and fixtures.

Construction was completed in 1901 and after the fitting ceremonies were

performed, county officials moved in.

Five years later, disaster struck. Late one afternoon, Christmas Eve, December, 1906 Madera firemen dashed out to fight one of the most spectacular fires in the city's history--the courthouse was ablaze.

By the time firemen reached the courthouse park the entire upper story and the tower--which was larger than the present one--were licked by flames. Although the hard-fighting firemen, aided by citizen volunteers, managed to quell the blaze before the building was completely burned out, the upper story and the tower were totally destroyed. Many irreplaceable county records were entirely lost.

The crash of the great clock-tower during the fire remained one of the most vivid memories of Jack Brammer, who was on the scene. "It was quite a sight," he reported, "the blazing tower toppled over the west side of the building, clear down to the ground."

Jack Brammer was Madera's fire chief from 1913 to 1955.

The cause of the fire has always remained a mystery.

The blackened remains furnished a discouraging sight to those who had fought for the courthouse just 5 years before. But there was no hesitation. The courthouse was soon rebuilt according to the original plans, except that the tower was square and somewhat shorter than the original. The same company that built the original did the rebuilding, at a cost of \$48,853. The same clock was used.

Since then, although a partial air-conditioning system, fluorescent lighting and other such modern conveniences improved the interior, the box-shaped outside remained much the same. At one time the grey, granite walls were blanketed with ivy but it was later shorn off and the bare stone exposed again.

But the tiny slips planted around the courthouse by the first land-owners have grown to giant trees and the bare, open areas out beyond on Yosemite avenue have been filled with streets and homes. These things,

rather than the unchanging granite of Madera county's first and only courthouse, have marked the passing years.

There are features of this old courthouse that are rather special. The clock tower; the clock striking the hours that could be heard beyond the city limits; the stair case leading up from the ground floor; the brass rails at the front entrance, kept gleaming by the many hands of people that grasped them as they entered or left the building and the balcony on the second floor, where many conferences were held by groups waiting for court to convene or recess.

There are some facts and dates related to the construction of the court house that will be interesting to some readers.

The cornerstone was laid on October 29, 1900. The building was completed in 1902.

The Madera County Historical Society has an invitation, donated by Mrs. Alice Koontz, inviting the people to a double celebration: The completion of the flume of Madera Sugar Pine Company and the laying of the corner stone of the new Courthouse. They celebrated two days, October 29 and 30, 1900. There was much fun and feasting, a bounteous barbecue, horse races, games etc. Among the names on the invitation committee we note the name of Nathan Rosenthal.

On the cornerstone are the names of the County Supervisors of 1900. They are E. H. Chapin, Chairman, W. S. Patterson, J. C. Straube, J. F. Daulton and H. A. Krohn.

The courthouse was declared unsafe in 1953. Reconstruction plans were drawn at a cost of \$27,500 but were shelved and the County Board voted to purchase the Lincoln School building just across the street on West Yosemite. The growth of the county, more county government departments, and more space necessitated the move. If the "Old Courthouse" had been remodeled, there would have been the need of an annex to it, in order to accomodate the necessary offices.

At present the courthouse stands

as Madera County's official symbol of Government. The only occupants are the Madera County Road Department and storage room and office for the Madera County Historical Society.

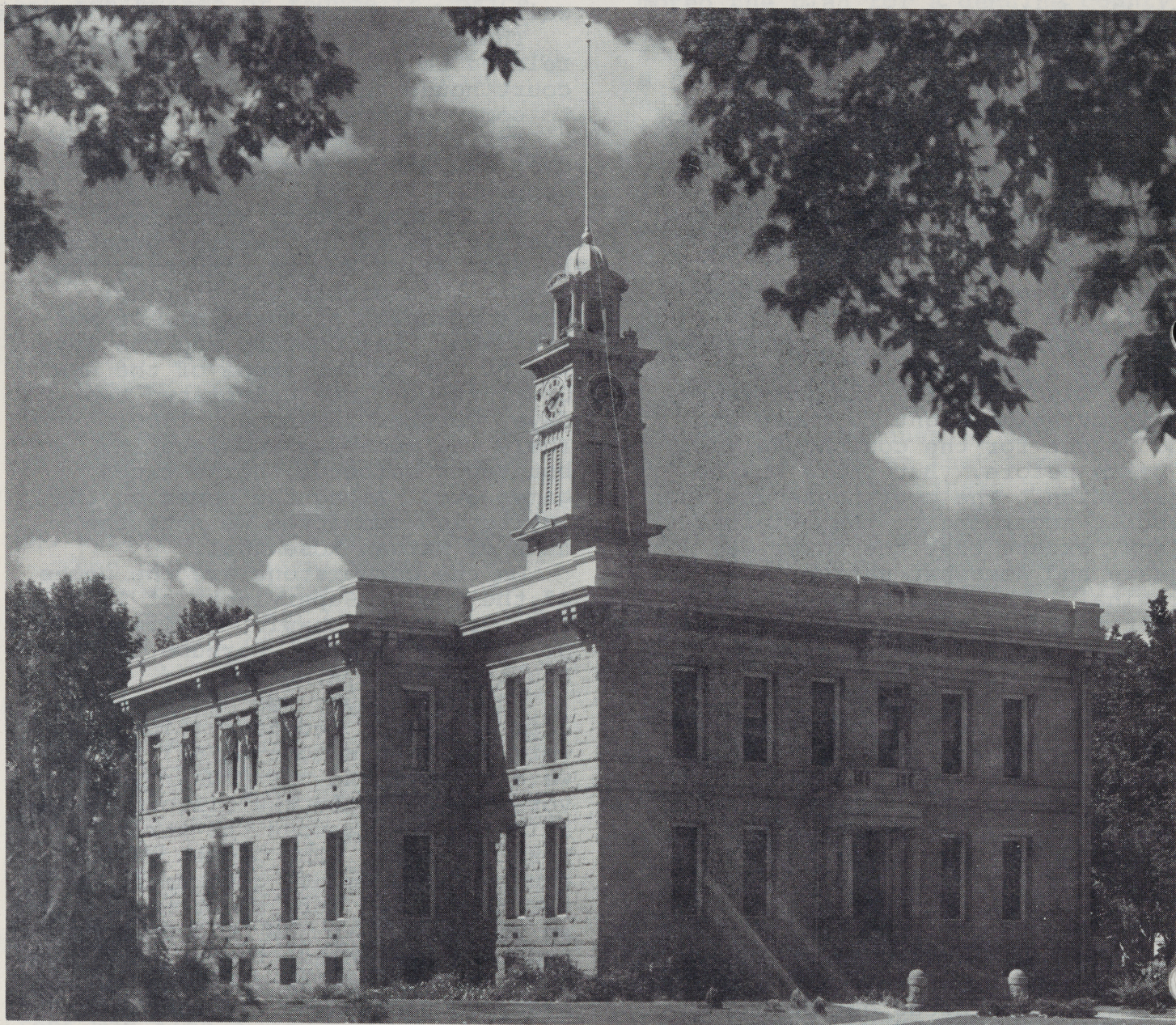
The courthouse is center of the decals on all county vehicles.

Should a decision ever be made to dismantle the building, the site could be used for any purpose.

According to County Counsel Roy E. Wolfe, the deed issued in 1897 by W. C. Maze and G. J. Wren contained only one provision which already has been met, that a courthouse be built there.

To settle controversy over whether or not the county could now make other use of the property, the county secured quit claim deeds to the site in 1957 from the three remaining heirs.

In 1968, on October 22, the Madera County Board officially declared that the "Old Courthouse" could be used as a Museum as soon as the Road Department was moved into new quarters.



1941
Madera County Court House



Laying The Corner Stone



Rosenthal Kutner Building, Now Madera Drug



Court House Burning on Dec. 24, 1906



Court House After Re-Construction

OFF WITH THE OLD, ON WITH THE NEW

Many changes will take place on down town Yosemite Avenue in the next few years.

The Hotel Aragon closed on April 1, 1968, James Department Store closed on February 22, 1969, Gibbs Hardware closed in the same month. All of these changes are necessary as the city and county grows. Two new bank buildings will be in the blocks between "D" and "C" Street facing East Yosemite.

Another change is on the corner of North "D" and East Yosemite. This building, two stories and for many years known as the Madera Drug Store will undergo, a face-lifting job. The upper story which contained offices for so many years will be removed. Many prominent Madera men had their offices at different times in that upper story, among the list were; Dr. Wing, Dr. Rinker, Dr. G. G. Hawkins, Dr. Dow Ransom, Dr. Omar Need, and Dr. Harvey Knowles.

The following story about the man who erected the building on the corner of East Yosemite and North "D" was compiled by Guy Crow. He used the San Joaquin Valley History, 1905, published by "The Chapman Publishing Company. Elton Macon, Security Title Company of Madera did the research on the history of ownership of the lots and building, Rosenthal and Kutner had their last store in Madera on the corner of "E" and East Yosemite, the present location of J. C. Penney.

NATHAN ROSENTHAL

The mercantile interest of Madera had an able representative in Mr. Rosenthal, resident member of the firm of Rosenthal and Kutner. Although a native of Germany, born February 8, 1853, he was a patriotic American, and especially loyal to the State of California, where he made his home since 1876, and where he had gained a host of warm personal friends. The foundation of his knowledge of the dry goods business was gained through an apprenticeship of three years to the trade, and at the expiration of his time he worked in different parts of his native land. During the year 1876 he arrived in California and coming to Fresno entered the employ of Kutner, Goldstein and Company, with whom he remained about twelve months. At the expiration of that period he went into business for himself in the same town, opening a cigar and tobacco store. In 1879 he established himself in business in Phoenix, Ariz., where he conducted a general mercantile store. However, while engaged in business there, he still considered California his home state, and in 1886 disposed of his Arizona interests, since which time he resided in Madera.

Shortly after the fire of 1886 Mr. Rosenthal built a small frame

storeroom and in it he inaugurated a mercantile business. At first his stock of goods was small, but as his sales increased he enlarged the stock to meet the demands of the trade. On the corner of Yosemite and "D" streets he erected a two story structure, 30 X 80 feet in dimensions, which was one of the first brick stores in the city. This has since been enlarged, so that it gave an area of 30 X 100 feet for the accommodation of the stock of general merchandise. However, after a time, even the increased space proved insufficient, and he then bought out the dry goods store of Sweet & Company, a few doors below the old stand, and moved his merchandise to the new quarters, where he carried a full line of dry goods and clothing. In the older building he had a full equipment of groceries, hardware and furniture. Since 1885 the business had been conducted under the firm title of Rosenthal & Kutner, his partner being J. Kutner, who has charge of the San Francisco office and resided in that city.

On the organization of the Commercial Bank of Madera, Mr. Rosenthal became one of its charter stockholders and served as one of the board of directors. Included in his other interests was the ownership of thirty-

eight acres in the heart of Madera, consisting of three-hundred lots, and all the buildings formerly owned by the old Madera Flume and Trading Company, among these buildings was a sash and door factory, 170 X 300 feet, operated by Watkins and Thurman. Since the organization of the board of fire commissioners of Madera he held the office of clerk and was very active in its workings. He was a member of the Madera Chamber of Commerce and an enthusiastic supporter of all enterprises for the benefit of the City.

In politics he voted with the Republican party. While in Phoenix

he was made a Mason and was connected with Madera Lodge No. 280, F. & M., Fresno Chapter No. 69, R. A. M., and the order of the Eastern Star. His marriage united him with Hattie Price, who was born and reared in San Francisco and was the daughter of a pioneer family of that city. Their only child, Thekla Rosenthal, was a graduate of Miss Hamlin's Seminary in San Francisco. The following information might prove interesting in that these lots, 8 and 9 have been owned by quite a few people from 1886 to 1968.

NORTH EASTERLY 30 FT. OF LOTS 8 & 9, BLOCK 39
City of Madera

H. S. Williams to Leopold Kutner, 1886 - 75' - N.E. - \$2,500.

Leopold Kutner to Return Roberts, 1890 - S.W.'ly 45' of N.E.'ly 75' of Lots 8-9 - \$8,500.

Estate of Leopold Kutner, Deceased to Amelia Kutner, widow $\frac{1}{2}$ interest and Louis Kutner, Alfred Kutner and Oscar Harris as Trustees - $\frac{1}{2}$ interest - 1901.

Louis and Alfred Kutner, surviving trustees to Hannah Harlan, Fannie Armuth, Carrie Rummelsburg, Dora Gottschalk, Florence Levy, Tillie Oestricher and Henry Korn, share and share alike - 1924.

Hannah Harlan, Fannie Armuth, Carrie Rummelsburg, Dora Gottschalk, Florence Levy, Tillie Oestricher and Henry Korn to Wells Fargo Bank and Union Trust Company, February, 1925.

Wells Fargo Bank and Union Trust Company to Dow H. Ransom and A. J. Manasse, October, 1925.

Estate of A. J. Manasse, deceased to Jessie G. Manasse widow in 1947.

Dow H. Ransom, widower to daughter Ida Mae Ransom a gift deed in 1935.

Ida Mae Ransom Radosevich and Mrs. Jessie G. Manasse to Marcella Oberti and Frank J. Oberti in 1968.

Marcella and Frank J. Oberti (wife and husband) to Carla F. Alessini and Phillip J. Oberti, $\frac{1}{2}$ interest each December 18, 1968.

New Officers for 1969

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A.S. Robertson	V. President
Jessie Potter	Secretary
Gordon Cook	Treasurer

Directors: Ralph Baraldi, J. Bennett, Evelyn Brown, Maud Lindemann, Ray Page, Floyd Park, Doris Seabury, Lillian Robertson

Curator of Records and Files
Maud Lindemann

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